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CHURCH UNITY.

BY

REV. R. CONDIT RUSSELL,

North Salem, N. Y.

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The Church a Divine Institution.

The Christian Church is the Kingdom of Heaven which the Prophets described in such glowing language that vast generations desired to see it and enjoy its blessings. While there were many kingdoms among men dividing communities from each other, God made known His will that He would establish a kingdom which should extend over the earth. After centuries of expectation had come and gone, St. John the Baptist startled the chosen nation with the prophetic cry, "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Our Saviour commenced His ministry with the same declaration, and then He went to work to lay the foundation of this kingdom, of His Church, against which, He said, the gates of hell shall not prevail. This kingdom would meet opposition. Unbelievers would speak against it; the world would persecute it, but nothing could overthrow it. Its foundation being the product of Divine wisdom, its laws coming from God, and having Him for its ruler and king, it would surmount every barrier in bringing the heathen to Christ and the uttermost parts of the world in humble subjection to the Divine sceptre.

One Church.

Our Saviour gave much instruction in regard to the condition of His Church. He drew some beautiful and restful pictures to show His relation to His followers, and their relation to Him and to each other. He said, "My sheep hear my voice and they follow Me. Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and there shall be one fold (flock) and one shepherd. One is your master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren." He prayed, "Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those whom Thou has given Me, that they may be one as We are. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also who shall believe on Me through their word, that they may all

be one in Us, as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they may be one in Us: that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me." Our Saviour's first followers were from the Jewish people. But the Gospel would go beyond Palestine and converts would be made among all nations. However numerous His followers might become, they would be as one flock, of which he would be the shepherd. Whatever their nationality or language might be, they would be as brethren, and He would be their master, their leader. There is nothing in these pictures to indicate that the followers of Christ would be as different flocks of sheep, having fences between them, through which they might look with bleating defiance, and over which they might leap to butt and batter each other, as though no relationship existed between them. There is nothing in these pictures to indicate that the followers of Christ would be as different tribes, who when not engaged against a common foe, would take pleasure in throwing darts at each other. But these pictures indicate the existence of peace and good will, harmony and unity. His followers should be as one flock, feeding in green pastures and beside still waters, hearing the voice and following the one shepherd. They should be as brethren dwelling together in unity, each and all guided by the wisdom of the elder brother.

The Apostles taught the same idea, the oneness or unity of the Church. They said, "We are all baptized into one body. Ye are the body of Christ. Ye also as lively stones are built up a spiritual house." And in the Apocalypse, the Church is called the Bride, the Lamb's Wife. These names indicate unity. There is but one Kingdom, one Church, one body, one spiritual house, one bride.

While the Apostles were yet living, there was, at times, some diversity of opinion among Christians. Some of the Jews who had been converted to Christianity could not conscientiously eat meat which had been offered to an idol. Others, knowing that the idol was nothing, could conscientiously eat the meat which had been offered to it. These two parties had no small disputation. One charged the other with violating the Law of Moses. The other replied that they were not under the Mosaic Law, that they were under the Gospel, and might lawfully eat all things.

A moral question was involved bearing upon the conscience of individuals. They might have separated and formed themselves into two religious bodies, and they might have formulated Articles of Faith having reference to the eating of meat. But an Apostle directed them to cease troubling each other. He told them, in substance, that the Church was broad enough for their views on this subject; that they could eat meat which had been offered to an idol, or abstain from eating it, according to their conscience, and still they would be the followers of Christ.

St. Peter, when preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles, accepted their hospitality and ate with them. This was contrary to Jewish custom, but he availed himself of the liberty of the Gospel, and called no man unclean. Some Christians, who had been converted from Judaism, but who still retained the Jewish prejudice in regard to associating with men of other nations, came to the place where St. Peter was laboring and living on terms of equality with those who had been converted from heathenism. St. Peter, knowing the views of his Jewish brethren, and fearing opposition, separated himself from the Gentiles, and ate with the Jews only. It was a little matter, but it caused excitement and debate, which extended to other questions contained in the law of Moses. St. Paul heard of this trouble, and he reproved St. Peter for his conduct, rebuked him in the presence of all, showed him his error, and explained the principles of Christianity on the points of contention, that this vacillating disciple might have the courage to live according to the Gospel, and that all the brethren might live in harmony. Here would have been an excellent opportunity, according to modern ideas and ways, for the establishment of two ecclesiastical organizations. St. Paul might have said to St. Peter: I hear that there is a little diversity of sentiment among the brethren. Men have different types of mind, they cannot all think alike on religious matters, even as they do not all think alike in regard to the jurisdiction of the Roman Empire. Let us separate. You establish the Church among the Jews, according to their prejudices. I will take the Gentiles and adapt myself to them. We will agree to disagree on the non-essentials. We will be all things to all men, and with these two great ecclesiastical bodies we shall bring Jews and Gentiles

into the fold. This would have been in harmony with modern ideas of individual types of mind and individual preferences. But it was not so with the founders of the Christian Church. St. Paul withstood St. Peter to his face, and reproved him for his conduct. St. Peter received the rebuke, wheeled into line, preserved the unity of the Church, and henceforth labored in harmony with the other Apostles.

We turn our attention to the city of Corinth, in which St. Paul had established the Church, and where, as his custom was, he had left religious teachers to look after the flock. Here, in this city of intelligence, was born the spirit of division. Christians arranged themselves under different leaders. They said, "I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ." One part adhered to the name of the Divine Master, three parts took the names of human leaders to distinguish their ecclesiastical positions. When St. Paul had heard of these divisions, he said nothing upon which advocates of denominational distinctions can find the least encouragement, but something which reproves and rebukes them. He said, "It hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, that there are contentions among you. Every of you saith, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? Now, I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." With these words he rebuked the spirit of division, and believers remained joined together in one spiritual body. During the Apostolic period—while the Apostles were yet living—they kept the Church united in faith and organization. The modern idea of having different religious bodies, so as to suit different types of mind, had no place with the founders of the Christian Church.

The Apostles taught what the Saviour had taught them. They labored under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, and placed the Church in the world according to Divine direction. But St. Paul looked into the future and saw the approach of evil. When speaking to the Ephesians, just before they should see his face

no more, he said, "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed, therefore, unto yourselves, and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the Church of God which He hath purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things to draw disciples after them." He wrote to St. Timothy, his fellow laborer, and said, "Preach the word, be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts shall they keep to themselves teachers having itching ears; and they shall turn their ears from the truth and shall be turned unto fables."

A Divided Church.

St. Paul's prediction was fulfilled. The wolves came and did not spare the flock. Teachers speaking perverse things arose and drew disciples after them. The wolves have multiplied, and the teachers have increased until their name is legion, and the Church, founded by the wisdom of the ever-living God, is looked upon as being anything and everything according to everybody's fancy. The condition of the Church is frequently discussed by men of all shades of religious belief. We read of remarks made in Conferences, Conventions, Synods, Associations and Congresses in regard to the unhappy divisions existing among Christians. Some make overtures or propositions which may lead to ecclesiastical unity; but at the present time there is a strong inclination to keep the denominational lines where they are; and the prevailing sentiment is unity in essentials, diversity in non-essentials. From the divisions which have taken place, and from the numerous religious bodies in existence, it seems that a great deal of importance is attached to what is called the non-essentials. A question arises upon which there is difference of opinion. Discussion follows and glows with more heat as it continues. The leaders become stubborn and unyielding, and finally the ecclesiastical body is rent in twain; some go one way and some another way, according to their sentiments. This scene has occurred time and

again ; it has taken place so often, and it has produced so many different ecclesiastical organizations as to suggest the idea that perhaps Christians pay more attention to the non-essentials than to the essentials. The non-essentials force them apart, the essentials being too weak to hold the body of Christ together. But what are the essential points of Christianity ? What are the fundamental principles upon which the Church rests ? Suppose we should send out papers to Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Unitarians, Universalists, Quakers, and to hundreds of other religious bodies, asking them to state what they consider to be the essential points of Christianity. On looking over these papers, as they return to us, we would find that many of them agree on certain points, and disagree on other points. Some would have a few articles of belief, and others would have many articles ; and some would differ almost entirely from the rest, placing among the non-essentials what the rest consider to belong to the fundamental principles of the Gospel. Let these papers be printed in pamphlet form, bearing the title, A message from the Churches to the world, that the world may know and receive the fundamental principles of Christianity, and we would have a document which, to say the least, would be very unsatisfactory. But this would be just what religious bodies claiming to be the Church, and claiming to teach the truth, hold.

Why not publish it then ? Why not send out millions of copies, place one in the hand of every man, woman and child throughout christendom, and scatter them through heathen lands, that people everywhere may know the truth as the churches hold it ? This being done, what fruit might we reasonably expect ? If you were seeking to know the truth, and this pamphlet should be placed in your hand, and your eyes should rest upon the title, A message from the Churches to the world, that the world may know and receive the fundamental principles of Christianity, would you not say, This is just what I want ? And after reading it, would you not lay it down with the feeling of disappointment, with great depression of spirit ? Thousands and tens of thousands would do it. They would be driven to the very verge of infidelity, and would give expression to feelings bordering on despair. If there is a hell, may we in some way escape it ; if

there is a heaven, may we be so fortunate as to get there ; if there is a Revealer of truth, may He have mercy upon us, for they who profess to be His servants and to teach His truth, have no mercy. Do you think that the different religious denominations, throughout christendom, would like to publish such a pamphlet and send it over the world ? I think there would be unity among them in saying *no.* But they are virtually doing this thing. They are teaching it in their Sunday schools, and preaching it from their pulpits, each endeavoring to guard and fortify his own against the heretical doctrines of his neighbor. The people endure it because they have become associated with respective religious bodies, and have imbibed the sentiments of the organization with which they are connected. Hence discords and conflicts move onward to convert the world from sin and error to God, the author of harmony and revealer of truth.

Halt !

It is time for the word halt to be passed from one ecclesiastical organization to another, until it shall resound throughout christendom, and until individuals and organizations shall ask, Where is the Church, the basis of militant movements against error ? It has been asked, What are you willing to give up in order to secure Church unity ? We do not need the unity, and the world does not need the unity, which may be based upon denominational compromises. What we need, and what the world needs, in this age of division and discord, is to find out where the Church is and what it is, that we may glorify God and benefit humanity.

Denominational concessions, one giving up this and another giving up that, in order that the Church may assume a position of respectability before the world, might be regarded as the offspring of human wisdom ; but human wisdom or human folly, call it what you please, has caused all the ecclesiastical divisions which have taken place since the days of the Apostles. It is time to halt, and in the midst of this confusion to ask, *Where* and *what* is the Christian Church ? We should not attempt to shield ourselves behind the statement that our ecclesiastical organization is founded upon the teaching Sacred Scripture, for they are all saying this, and the declaration implies that the Gospel contradicts

itself as often as the hundreds of religious bodies contradict each other. We should not attempt to shield ourselves behind the statement that our form of Church government is the best for the advancement of Christianity, for they are all saying this to the confusion of the world. Nor should any one assert that the church or society to which he belongs accords with reason and common sense, for the atheist takes the same position when ridiculing Christianity and the belief in a personal God. It is time for intelligent and devout men to stop this nonsense, to lay aside party spirit and to have mercy upon the world. It is time for the different religious bodies throughout christendom, without arbitration, and without making concessions to each other, to seek a basis of union.

The Basis of Union.

With this in view, the important question arises, Where may such a basis be found? We can find this place of rest by traveling either of two different roads. We may start from the instructions given by our Lord, pass through the founding of the Church by the Apostles, into the next period of two hundred years which abounds in ecclesiastical literature which throws a strong light upon the primitive condition of the Church; or we may start from our present position, go backward through the centuries of division and discord, until we reach the year three hundred, and there join our voices with the voice of united christendom in saying, "I believe in one Universal and Apostolic Church." The position of the undivided Church through the first three hundred years presents a basis of union upon which our divided christendom may marshal its forces, without arbitration and without making concessions to each other. Let us look at these two different roads which we may take to reach this basis of union. We call ourselves Christians, the followers of Christ. We, therefore, take His Gospel as the guide of our faith and the rule of our deportment. We have a record of His life, which contains much that He said and did while He walked among men. But He gave His disciples more instruction than we find in the four Gospels. He gave His disciples much information when they were by themselves, and between

His resurrection and ascension. He said many things to them in relation to His Kingdom, which the four Evangelists did not record. This instruction which the four Evangelists did not record, we may find by taking a step forward, and seeing what the Apostles said and did, when they were teaching the observance of whatsoever the Saviour had commanded, and when the Holy Ghost was bringing to their minds whatsoever the Saviour had said unto them. The Acts of the Apostles and their Epistles, as given in the New Testament, give a view of the Church and the application of the Gospel to the heart and life of men. But the Apostles gave more instruction than we find in their Acts and in their Epistles. They preached orally and established the Church in many places before a single word of the New Testament was written. When the Apostles were absent they wrote Epistles, as the necessity of believers required, but when they were in the worshiping assembly they taught orally. Through this written and unwritten instruction, they established and strengthened the Church, and left men qualified to carry on the work of evangelizing the world. As we get from the New Testament but a small amount of the instruction which the Apostles gave, so we get but a small view of the Church as the Apostles established it. To see what the Apostolic Church was, we must again take a step forward. Soon after the Apostles had passed away, those to whom the care of the Church was committed began to write about the Church. Much which they wrote has come down to us. We have "The Apostolic Fathers," a little work called "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles," the "Apostolical Constitutions," and many sermons, all of which throw light upon the Church, and enable us to see it as an organization. This literature places before us the prayers and songs of praise used in the worshiping assembly, the sacraments administered, the services accompanying them, and the position of the clergy in the Church. During the two hundred years which followed the death of the last Apostle, ecclesiastical writers described the Church as it existed among them, and they took pains to state that it was not changed and molded to suit their sense of propriety, but that it existed among them as it had come to them from the past. Resting in this

period and looking over christendom, we do not find different ecclesiastical organizations, but we see one Church, one universal Church claiming to be the Church founded by the Apostles according to the instruction of our Lord. Let us now take the other road and go backward to this proposed basis of union. Let us start from the point where we happen to be—from the religious body to which we belong. If we travel backward through its history of one hundred years, and find that it split off from some other religious body, we may consider ourselves excusable if a doubt should arise as to whether this religious organization of one hundred years is the true Church, for we find that something different existed before it. Let us then pursue our course through that body from which this one separated. If we find that some strong-minded man started it a few centuries ago, let us pursue our course through that religious body from which he caused a separation; let us go backward, further and further, until we can look over christendom without seeing different ecclesiastical organizations, but seeing everywhere one undivided Church claiming to be Apostolic. This will place us within the year three hundred. If we go back to the year two hundred, we shall see the same undivided Church claiming to be Apostolic. Back a little further, and we shall see godly men who conversed with the Apostles; and everywhere, from the day of Pentecost to the year three hundred, we shall find the same undivided Church claiming to be Apostolic; and here we may rest. If the clergy and the laity of the hundreds of religious bodies which are now contradicting each other and confusing the world, should pursue this course, their paths would lead to one point. Stepping backward through one century would obliterate many denominational distinctions and bring their members closer together. Three centuries more and a host of ecclesiastical organizations would be dropped. A journey of twelve centuries more, and denominational lines would disappear, and the millions of Christians, clergy and laity, would stand upon the same basis, without arbitration, concessions or compromises. There would be simply the abandonment of whatever different types of mind have added to the Church, and the restoration of whatever different types of mind have taken from the Church.

The Church is God's Kingdom, which He has established for the evangelization of the world and for the uplifting of humanity. Its laws, its sacraments and its ministry are of His appointment. He did not consult human wisdom in the arrangement of these matters, and He has not given any intimation that He placed His church into the hands of men to be changed from generation to generation to suit supposed requirements; but there is intimation that He established His Church as He intended it should remain to the end of time. Its brightness has been dimmed by the exaltation of human wisdom above the wisdom of its Omniscient King. Let those who call themselves Christians do their utmost to put away this sacrilege. Let the babble which is confusing the world cease, and let all speak the same thing. Let the different folds become one flock, hearing the voice and following the one shepherd.

Then one Christian will not address another and ask, To what church do you belong? And the stranger, desiring to worship with the assembly, will not ask, What church building is that? For every spire pointing heavenward will simply proclaim, this is the house of God; and all Christians will be recognized as belonging to the same flock, as one in Christ, as He is one with the Everlasting Father. Then the Church will shine like the sun, and the Gospel will be as the voice of God to the world.

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